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ABSTRACT

This report utilizes survey data and a literature review to analyze challenges made to curriculum materials in Florida public schools in the late 1980s by groups and persons described as the "New Christian Right" (NCR). Survey data were gathered from the chief instructional program supervisors in the state's 67 school districts. Among the findings of the study were that NCR proponents were active in some Florida school districts during the period of the study, and that complaints about the instructional materials focused on traditional values and family issues. Many Florida school districts also have adopted materials selection and complaint review procedures and attempted to involve the community in those procedures. Among recommendations based on the findings are that: (1) school districts should insure that evaluation/adoption procedures are in place; (2) complaint review committees be comprised of a cross-section of community viewpoints, and (3) the State Department of Education should provide school district personnel with technical assistance related to instructional materials evaluation criteria, adoption procedures, and complaint review policies. (DB)

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The New Christian Right and the Public School Curriculum: A Florida Report

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THE NEW CHRISTIAN RIGHT AND THE PUBLIC SCHOOL CURRICULUM: A FLORIDA REPORT

PERSPECTIVE

Throughout the 1980s, adherents of the New Christian Right (NCR) were involved in challenges to curriculum materials used by the public schools. Encompassing "a number of conservative forces that emerged in American Christianity in the 1970s and coalesced with the political right in 1979-80" (Pierard, 1987), the NCR is a national network of fundamentalist religious groups founded on a reverence for family, religion, and community. The NCR is committed to authority, discipline, and a moral order based on a clear hierarchy of values and standards.

The NCR has bitterly opposed such specific issues as women's rights, gay rights, abortion, unionization, and social legislation of various sorts. As part of their educational platform, NCR adherents support parental control over the teaching of patriotism, free enterprise, and scientific creationism. In its crusade against "secular humanist" curricula, the NCR has worked tirelessly to eliminate sex education, evolution, and a vast array of instructional materials from the public schools (Parkay, 1985).

Despite the U.S. Supreme Court ruling in the Pico case (Board of Education Island Trees Union Free District v. Pico, 1982), which specified that a school board could not remove library books simply because it disliked ideas contained therein, NCR proponents have continued to enmesh themselves in various aspects of the public school curriculum. As a result, intellectual and academic freedom

are being challenged in Florida and elsewhere, and indications are that complaints about textbooks and library books have increased during the past several years.

To provide data on the extent of NCR-sponsored censorship activities in Florida, survey data were gathered from the chief instructional program supervisors in the state's 67 school districts. Four questions provided the focus for this study:

1. With what frequency do Florida school districts experience NCR-initiated complaints about curriculum materials?
2. What tactics do NCR adherents use?
3. How knowledgeable are chief instructional program officers about the NCR?
4. How do chief instructional program officers respond to NCR-initiated complaints?

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to determine the extent to which adherents of the New Christian Right were involved in complaints about curriculum materials in the 67 public school districts of Florida from 1986-89. A secondary purpose was to determine the responses of the districts' chief instructional program supervisors to those activities.

EDUCATIONAL SIGNIFICANCE

The censorship activities reported in this study reflect the tension that is occurring in various Florida communities because of the state's increasing cultural pluralism. Educators in Florida (and

elsewhere) should become more aware of the concerns of NCR adherents and consider them when adopting curricular materials. Additionally, the findings of this study can be used to develop and implement policies and procedures that will enable educators to respond effectively to complaints by NCR advocates when they do occur. Without such procedures, there is the potential for continued and costly disruption of the public school curriculum. In addition, these NCR censorship activities are a challenge to the concept of the academic freedom of the teacher and to the free access of knowledge by students.

DATA SOURCE

The population for the survey was the chief instructional program supervisor in each of the 67 school districts of the state of Florida. Typically, this person had the title of "Assistant Superintendent of Instruction/ Curriculum" and was responsible by job description for the development, implementation, evaluation, and supervision of the various instructional programs in the district. This person usually dealt with such instructional issues as programs/courses offered, instructional goals and objectives, program standards, instructional materials, and testing. Regardless of the title used in a particular school district, the crucial consideration was that the survey was sent to the person who was most likely be most able to supply the information desired (Borg & Gall, 1983, p. 416).

The membership listing of The Florida Organization of Instructional Leaders (FOIL) was initially utilized to identify the

chief instructional program supervisor in each district. Except for eight districts, each district was represented in that organization by its chief instructional person. The Florida Education Directory: 1988-89 published by the Florida State Department of Education (1988) was used to identify those chief instructional supervisors in each district who did not belong to FOIL.

METHOD

A researcher-developed survey instrument using Likert scales, bi-polar adjective checklists, and open and closed question formats was used to determine the extent, if any, of the impact of the New Christian Right on instructional materials in the state of Florida. This survey was mailed to the chief instructional program supervisors in each of the 67 school districts of the state of Florida.

The survey instrument used in this study reflected the review of the literature and was designed by the researcher in accordance with the "Total Design Method (TDM)" developed by Dillman (1978). Dillman's TDM is a highly structured mail survey process which aims at maximizing responses by attending to every detail that might affect response behavior.

The researcher-developed survey instrument, entitled "Instructional Materials Complaints in Florida," consisted of a cover letter and 15 varied format items. Questions were designed to identify the respondent's beliefs, that is, what he/she thinks or perceived about the past, present, or future reality and knowledge about the issue. Provision was made for soliciting specific information about instructional materials complaints and comments.

In order to determine the readability and the appropriateness of the questions on the survey instrument , a pilot survey was conducted (Borg & Gall, 1983; Dillman, 1978; Parten, 1950). The draft survey instrument was administered in the presence of the researcher to three colleagues and two potential users. Observation was made of any difficulty field test respondents had in answering questions. Modifications in the instrument were made prior to its final use. Clarification of instructions were made on two questions.

After identifying the chief instructional program supervisors as specified in the Data Source section and determining their addresses, a cover letter soliciting their participation and a survey instrument was mailed to each of them. A total of 37 (55.2 percent) was returned after the first mailing. After three weeks when no response was received, a second letter and survey instrument was mailed to each of the 30 non-respondents . Subsequently, 18 responses were received. Four weeks after that, a third and final cover letter and survey was sent by certified mail to the 13 who still had not responded. Finally, a postcard reminder was sent to those who had not responded to the prior three mailings. To determine if there were any differences in responses based on the timing or method of response between the 37 who initially responded and the 22 (32.8 percent) who subsequently responded, a chi-square was used to test the goodness-of-fit of the total sample. No statistically significant difference was found.

In summary, a total of 59 supervisors (88.1 percent) completed the survey, and their districts comprised 98.8 percent of the state's student population (N = 1,664,563). The eight non-responding

districts were among the smallest districts in student population, and all 10 districts with the largest student population were included in the survey responses.

Quantifiable survey data were arranged in frequency tables and graphic representations, and non-quantifiable data were presented through descriptive narration.

MAJOR FINDINGS

Based on the literature search and the data obtained from the survey of chief instructional program supervisors, the following findings were determined

1. Almost one half (32 or 54.2 percent) of Florida's school districts experienced 1-3 complaints about instructional materials during the time period of this study; 11 respondents (18.6 percent received 4-10 complaints; four respondents (6.8 percent received more than 10); and 43 or 72.9 percent considered it a problem to some extent.
2. Parent(s)/guardian(s), concerned citizen groups, and church(es)/church affiliated group(s) were reported as the primary sources of complaints about materials. Slightly more than one out of every three respondents (22 or 37.9 percent) reported that they perceived fundamentalist religious groups to be behind the complaints they were receiving.
3. Library books and textbooks were the most frequently complained about instructional materials because of such topics as profanity/obscenity, sex education, or secular

humanism. Particular instructional materials objected to included: Catcher in the Rye, The French Lieutenant's Woman, There's A Pig in Every Crowd, "Sex, Drugs, and AIDS" (film), People (magazine), "Vision Quest" (a counseling program), "Wizard" (a game).

4. Typical tactics used by those complaining about instructional materials included complaint letters to the superintendent/principal, complaints to individual school board members, and refusal to permit their children to use/view particular materials.
5. Knowledge of the New Christian Right and its aims, membership, and activities by district chief instructional program supervisors appears to vary. Overall, 43.5 percent of the responses indicated limited knowledge, while 41.8 percent of the responses reported considerable knowledge. Specifically, respondent knowledge of and about specific NCR organizations and various concepts associated with censorship was varied, knowledge of NCR personalities was limited, and knowledge of one of the most publicized recent judicial decisions (Mozert v. Hawkins County) the most limited.
6. District chief instructional program supervisors reported neutral feelings/opinions toward the NCR. Only percent reported the strongest negative or positive feelings/opinions in that regard.
7. Responses by the total group of 52 supervisors and by the subgroup of supervisors from the 22 districts wherein the

respondents reported perceiving that fundamentalist religious groups were behind the complaints being received were consistent in indicating that large number of those districts already had adopted policies dealing with complaints about materials, had provided their personnel with inservice, and had established complaint review committees. Typically, districts were not planning any new activities in this area.

8. Almost one out of every three districts reported removing at least one instructional material title from use as a result of complaint(s). One district reported removing as many as four-six titles. In those 22 districts where the chief instructional program supervisor perceived fundamentalist religious groups to be behind materials complaints, materials tended to be removed from usage at a higher rate (two districts out of every three) than the overall state rate.

CONCLUSIONS

Findings of the literature search and the survey undertaken as part of this study indicate that New Christian Right proponents have indeed been active in some Florida school districts during the time period of this study. Complaints about materials submitted to various school district personnel focus on the topics of traditional values and family issues. This is consistent with the findings of Pines (1982), Pincus (1984), Sorman (1985), and Pierard (1987), all of whom identified those topics as the distinguishing concerns and focus of the NCR movement.

Recent litigation over objectionable school instructional materials in Florida in Bay, Walton, and Columbia counties paralleled legal actions in Hawkins County, Tennessee, and Mobile County, Alabama which had garnered so much national attention during the early and mid-eighties. NCR activity in Florida had followed the national NCR network campaign of attempting to remove objectionable materials from the nation's schools. This effort in Florida reflected what Arons (1981) and Pierard (1987) identified as the primary strategy of NCR adherents and the most significant censorship force in the 1980s. The survey data identified by this study related to the findings of the People For the American Way which, in 1987-88, identified Florida (along with Colorado) as having the largest number of reported censorship activities, and that they were twice as likely to succeed than previously. Findings from the researcher's study indicate that in those districts where fundamentalist/religious groups were perceived to be behind complaints, two out of three of those districts had removed one or more books as a result of complaints. Additionally, the findings of this study related to the level of censorship activities and the removal of materials as a result of complaints is consistent with a similar survey undertaken by the Minnesota Civil Liberties Union and with the report of the United States National Commission on Libraries and Information Services to a U. S. Senate subcommittee in 1986. And finally, the 1989 report by the People For the American Way noted that there were increased incidents of reported censorship attempts, that Florida had one of the highest number of reported incidents, and that half of all challenged materials were

removed from use. The data gathered from the researcher's study are consistent with those findings. It would appear that during the time period of this study Florida school districts did indeed experience the impact of the NCR movement.

It can be concluded from the literature and the study survey that NCR proponents in Florida acted in accordance with what Lorentzen (1980) and Wald (1987) termed the "life style concerns" theory. Those complaining about instructional materials in Florida's public schools reflected the conflict between two divergent life styles, and they sought to protect their particular values, customs, and behaviors. These NCR activists attempted to maintain the family as a protected environment in which to rear their children and socialize them in their faith and life style. In order to accomplish these aims they engaged in political activity. Study findings are consistent with the work previously done by Jenkinson (1979), Brodinsky (1982), and Pincus (1984), which revealed that NCR adherents had undertaken a national effort to organize "concerned citizens groups" in order to exert pressure on local school boards and administrators to remove instructional materials deemed objectionable. Data obtained as a result of this study tend to indicate that this same tactic was used in Florida. After having lost two major legal actions (the Mozert and Hawkins County cases), the NCR shifted its tactics during 1987-88 and sought to play a more active early role in the selection of instructional materials and in getting control of seats on local school boards. Indications from this study's data are that this shift was also beginning to occur in Florida as a number of districts experienced requests by those who had

complained about materials to be on selection and/or review committees, and some districts found such individuals becoming actively involved in school board member elections.

Analysis of the survey data reveals that many Florida school district personnel have heeded the urgings of such organizations as the American Library Association and the National Council of Teachers of English and such authoritative professionals as Stahlschmidt (1983) and McCarthy (1989) and have adopted materials selection and complaint review procedures and attempted to provide a legitimate community role and involvement in those procedures. Many Florida districts had already implemented the 1971 Iowa Plan, even though none referred to their policy by that name, and several others were making plans in that regard. Survey data disclosed that Florida chief instructional program supervisors have not become particularly knowledgeable about the NCR and its activities as they were urged to do so by Lee (1988). Unfortunately, their knowledge was both varied and limited in many instances. Some individuals appeared to indicate a total lack of basic knowledge in this area.

The results of this study are important to administrators as they plan and implement instructional materials evaluation, adoption, and usage programs in the public schools. Administrators have various statutory requirements and State Board of Education Rules regulating instructional materials with which to comply. In addition, local school boards may enact additional policy requirements. The findings of this study imply a need for districts to establish a defined, written set of policies and procedures to provide

a legal authority base and an on-going structured process related to instructional materials. Such policies need to address such issues as evaluation criteria, adoption procedures, parent and community representation, and complaint review procedures. Administrators, media specialists, and teachers need to be provided with appropriate inservice related to instructional materials, and in particular, awareness of the composition, aims, and tactics of the New Christian Right. Clearer policies and informed personnel should result in greater efficiency and effectiveness in the adoption and continued use of instructional materials, which should have both direct and indirect benefits to school districts.

Caution should be exercised in that the implications of this study were derived from a limited population, geographic area, and duration. These limitations should be taken into consideration in making any generalizations to other populations or geographic areas.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Although the population and procedures of this study were limited, the researcher believes that they were satisfactory for a study of limited scope. The following recommendations are submitted as a result of the findings of this study:

1. School districts should review and clarify their criteria for the evaluation and adoption of instructional materials.
2. School districts should insure that evaluation/adoption and complaint review committees are composed of a cross-section of community viewpoints.

3. School personnel should receive inservice on the aims, tactics, personalities, and organizations of the NCR.
4. Decision makers should examine the demographic composition of instructional materials evaluation/adoption committees and identify the prevalent politico-religious beliefs of the members.
5. The State Department of Education should provide school district personnel with technical assistance related to instructional materials evaluation criteria, adoption procedures, and complaints review policies.

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